

Introduction

This study aims to look at the role played by South African authorities in the nineteenth, twentieth and now in the twenty-first century in stabilizing and destabilizing the *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda polity. A 'long historical' approach to rulership amongst the Vhavhenda will be taken, in order eventually to sharpen the focus on the central question of how the National Party government assisted Patrick Ramaano Mphephu to become *khosikhulu* of the Venda people in August 1979. Subsequently, the study will also investigate the role of the ANC government after 1994 to try and restore the title of *vuhosivhuhulu* of the Venda people through the appointment of the Ralushai Commission and later the Nhlapo Commission. (*Vuhosivhuhulu* in Venda was abolished in the early 1990s when General Brigadier Ramushwana of the Venda Defence Force staged a *coup* and replaced *Gota* Frank Ndwakhulu Ravele, the then President of the homeland Republic of Venda.)

Conflicts about, and the influence of outsiders in, determining rulership of the Venda polity did not start when P.R. Mphephu ascended to the throne after the death of his father in the early 1950s. There were already signs of unstable rulership as early as the 1800s. Although the thesis will not focus primarily on early incidents of rulership disputes, a few chapters will be dedicated to revisiting the historiography of the earlier periods, before P.R. Mphephu's era. This long view will help to place in context mythical contentions like, for example, the argument that the Singo, whose leaders are the Ramabulana, were the first rulers of the Venda polity. Especially in the light of the prominence of gender in the current and ongoing rulership disputes amongst the Vhavhenda, special attention is paid in these contextualizing chapters to the role of *makhadzi*, or the ruler's sister(s) as a female mediating force in ruling families. With reference to the work of Stayt, Rambau and Matshidze,¹ I illustrate how this role, intended to be played behind the scenes, was sometimes sidelined, with far-reaching consequences.

1 H.A. Stayt, *The Bavenda*, Frank Cass, London, 1968, p. 208; V.J. Rambau, *Role of Venda Women in Formation and Operation of Women in Burial Societies*, MA dissertation, University of Venda, 1999, South Africa, p. 78; P.E. Matshidze, *The Role of Makhadzi in Traditional Leadership Among the Venda*, PhD thesis, The University of Zululand, 2013, p. 43.

It has to be emphasized that the first five chapters are contextual, serving the purpose of providing readers with the crucial necessity of perspective which results from a long view. I was relying mostly on existing historiography in order to build this 'backdrop'. The long backstory thus provided, will give the reader an impression of the way knowledge about the Venda *vhuhosivhuhulu* had been forged over the years as the writings of historians, anthropologists, linguists and archaeologists converged,² not only in scholarly literature but also in Venda 'knowing' – as parts of this corpus of scholarly knowledge unevenly and selectively became integrated in and subservient to the ways Vhavenda kept their history alive in beliefs, practices and performances³ that could be nationalistic, and/or postcolonial, and/or opportunistic, and/or unifying and/or divisive.

A truly critical reappraisal of the precolonial and early colonial era would have required engagement with the German records of the Berlin Missionaries who had worked amongst the Venda people since the 1870s – a task which is beyond my linguistic means.⁴ Against the broad canvas of the currently existing historiography, I position my own contribution in the research as from chapter six and especially chapter 7 onwards, where I analyse the commission reports of the past few decades as my primary sources, along with a series of interviews I conducted in 2015 and 2016. To date, the Ralushai and Nhlapo Commission reports have not yet been subjected to critical enquiry with reference to the Venda situation as I endeavor to accomplish in this thesis.

The research is not intended to play the role of adjudicating on the *vhuhosivhuhulu* conflicts as that is the role of the Venda people themselves to decide who their *khosikhulu* is, and whether they would want a *khosikhulu* regardless of the fact that it could be argued that this had been a 'Bantustan invention'. It will be unfair to expect the research to play the role of the courts of this country or to serve the purpose of another Commission of Inquiry. It will be enough to say that no one knows how the conflicts of *vhuhosivhuhulu* will be resolved. In the

2 See D. Newbury, 2007, Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon: Jan Vansina and the Debate over Oral Historiography in Africa, 1960-1985, *History in Africa* 34, p. 214.

3 I. Hofmeyr, 2005, *We Spend our Years as a Tale that is Told. Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Kingdom*, Wits University Press, Johannesburg.

4 An example of how this can be done, is found in the doctoral thesis and subsequent book (as well as a number of articles) by A. Kirkaldy, 2005, *Capturing the Soul. The Vhavenda and the Missionaries 1870-1900*, Protea Book House, Pretoria.

end, this thesis interrogates the issue of whether *vhuhosihulu* can survive by itself, or whether it needs external political intervention to continue. The study will also look critically at what is it that politicians are intending to gain in traditional matters – the extent to which “national interest” encompasses, or supersedes, or contradicts, notions of “tribal identity”. As such, the study aims to contribute to an even broader history: of the malleable, multiple and complex meaning of “Venda”.

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